

Suiseki

The Essence of Nature in a Single Stone

Suiseki is an example of a traditional culture of appreciating nature, which developed independently in Japan. Suiseki strongly reflects Japan's aesthetics and way of seeing nature, and has garnered attention from around the world in recent years.

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A *suiseki* stone suggestive of
"mountains afar"



SUISEKI is the art of appreciation of a single naturally occurring stone. Suiseki stones are said to lie at the heart of “*bonseki*,” which entails representing a Japanese garden on a small tray and viewing the creation. As the novelist Kawabata Yasunariⁱ writes in his essay *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself*, “the Japanese garden... symbolizes the vastness of nature. [...] Compressed to the ultimate, the Japanese garden becomes the *bonsai* dwarf garden, or the *bonseki*, its dry version.” (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1968/kawabata/lecture/>) In other words, *suiseki* and *bonsai* can be called the twin pillars of a traditional Japanese

culture that appreciates the vastness or essence of nature.

The art of *suiseki* is said to have originated from a pastime of stone appreciation that existed in fourteenth-century China, and there is even a *suiseki* stone that is said to have been used by Emperor Godaigo (1288-1339). Subsequently, numerous intellectuals, tea masters, businesspeople, and others became fascinated by *suiseki*, and the appreciation of *suiseki* came to strongly reflect the Japanese view of nature.

There are various cultures of stone appreciation around the world. In Japan, *suiseki* stones with a pitch-black color are considered to be the finest. That is because, rather than novelty or brilliance, value is attached to a stone's capacity to evoke the natural atmosphere of remote mountains and valleys, or give a sense of the mystery of all creation.

ⁱ Japanese novelist and literary critic (1899–1972), the first Japanese to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature

Suiseki stones are typically left outside and exposed to the elements to develop a patina of age



looking for shapes and scenes in the stone, the viewer's aesthetic sense and creativity is exercised through this principle of *mitate* (here, the aesthetic concept of likening a stone to something in nature).

According to the Nippon Suiseki Association, there are five factors used in evaluating a stone and its potential as a suiseki. An excellent suiseki should be of good material; have a fine shape, surface texture and color; and have an appearance that intimates age. In the case of the patina of age factor in particular, aspects such as who has previously owned the stone and in what circumstances, or the owner and associated episodes, all become things to be appreciated. Furthermore, the practice of stone rearing contributes to the creation of the patina of age on a stone.

Kobayashi explains, “Freshly picked stones are pointy and give an impression of roughness. You then place them outside and expose them to the elements and let them dry in the sun for a long period of time to create a patina of age. Pouring water on a stone changes its expression (texture), and the properties of the stone will determine how it absorbs the water and changes over time.”

Suiseki has become popular in other countries too in recent years, with more and more foreign enthusiasts coming to display their stones at Japanese exhibitions. Kobayashi says that the works of these people are innovative and always stimulate him.

“Anybody can take up suiseki appreciation anywhere, so I want people to start by going out and looking for stones from rivers and mountains.”

If you pick up a natural stone lying in the rivers and mountains and gaze at it in your hand, a small cosmos will unfold. That discovery is the first step to enjoying and appreciating suiseki. 

Kobayashi Kunio, who is a leading bonsai craftsman, the founder of the Shunkaen Bonsai Museum, and chairman of the Nippon Suiseki Association, comments, “Just like there are Shinto shrines that enshrine stones as objects of worship, the Japanese have strongly sensed divinity in stones since ancient times. That kind of sensibility is tightly condensed in suiseki.”

The first pleasure to be derived from suiseki is their resemblance to certain shapes. Stones that resemble the shapes of birds, animals, gods, the Buddha, or holy people are easy to understand. There are also suiseki stones that express islands in the sea, inlets, waterfalls flowing down the mountainside, and other forms of natural scenery. An especially important motif, which might well be considered the foundation of suiseki, is one that is suggestive of “mountains afar.” In